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From: Tamir Weiner

V A L E N T I N A ==> (somewhat new) book review

A few months ago I spotted an interesting entry on the local BBS here concerning some stories originally appearing in ANALOG Science Fiction and Science Fact under these titles:

Valentina - May 1984  
The Crystal Ball - August 1984  
The Light in the Looking Glass - September 1984

The BBS description of the stories intrigued me so I had my wife look for them on a recent visit to the States. To my surprise and pleasure they now exist together in a single paperback book:

"Valentina: Soul In Sapphire"  
by Joseph H. Delaney and Marc Stiegler  
Printed by Baen Books (distributor Simon & Shuster) first printing October 1984.

Almost as soon as it arrived I picked it up and polished it off in just two sittings. I usually don't inhale books that quickly but this one caught my interest. It read as fast as any great SF I've read by Heinlein or Asimov. The Net has gotten me fascinated by the subject of telecommunications and computer networks, and I've learned quite a bit since my recent exposure to the Net. Only wish work permitted me more time to "hack" around, but I'm glad for the time I do have. The world has in fact become that tiny electronic village which the visionaries of only 20 years ago wrote!

\*\* mini - review (non-spoiler) \*\*

So what is *Valentina* about? As you can surmise, about computers, networks, and related topics. But it's much more than that. The central plot line revolves around the self-aware program which one Celeste Hacket, hacker extraordinaire has created, and which she names "Valentina". It is about *Valentina's* personality development more than her birth, and about her fight for survival in a not so friendly world. But this book is more than just a computer update of the Frankenstein story, and more than just a hackers wet-dream. This is a story of personality, and people. Of artificial intelligence and the nature of sentience. What makes a person a person? And when is a program really intelligent? Does a sentient program have any rights as do sentient humans? Or is it just so much code to be purged when it gets in someone's way. What the author's have done is use a background of computers and networks to explore some issues and raise some questions in a novel that is very entertaining, and provoking without being philosophical, or pushing an ideology. I'll say from the outset that it has some technical flaws and noticeable omissions: the background of a world-wide network is glossed over and could have been developed more. From the AI standpoint the author's stretch one's "willing suspension of disbelief" which all SF novels require, perhaps too much when *Valentina* leaps from self-awareness to real human understanding, expression, communication in just a few pages. But I think one can forgive this technological blasphemy and poetic license of the authors because the point here is not the how's and why's of Artificial Intelligence, but rather what comes after... the definition of sentience, of self-awareness, of rights to existence, and the relationship between aware computer programs (rather than aware "hardware" an interesting distinction) and their human creators, and competitors perhaps in a world which can be hostile to well meaning programmers and their creations. So what if the book has flaws! Ever read a book which didn't? It is fast paced, has memorable characters -- even if they sometimes are a bit stereotypical. In a nutshell, this book deals with a variety of ideas in a story which is delightful, and entertaining. If you like networking, and computer programming, it's a good read.

\*\*\* Detailed discussion of "Valentina" MILD SPOILER \*\*\*

In response to what started as some criticisms of *Valentina* I've added these comments which look more in depth at some of the questions raised by the story....

*Valentina* was called non-innovative, perhaps, but that is no great fault. Witness the current discussion of *STAR WARS*, or *BATTLE BEYOND THE STARS*. Both have been called great ripoffs. If stories are less than original, the it is a question of how they are written, not is it the first on

the block to deal with a topic. The treatment of AI in Valentina is not original, but I believe the point of the story is not technological innovation, but exploring the personality aspects of AI and issues may be raised by self-aware programs that migrate over world networks.

Valentina's birth and development are a bit spotty. In the space of just a few pages she goes from the beginnings of self-awareness to human expression, and then later to understanding and communication. She uses complex terms like love, hate, and worry freely and in the right context. This is a tough nut. Current discussions in AI center around how far indeed we are from this point of real understanding and communication with programs. But I think the authors here wanted to start out with a very "logical" computer-like being, and then they ask us to make a "leap of faith" in accepting at some point Valentina's use of human language to express herself. It was abrupt as leaps of faith go, but essential to the pace of the book. I'm don't see this a flaw, more like poetic license to carry the points to be developed later, instead of being bogged down in issues of how an AI program can really get to be self-aware, and deal with human communication and understanding. The Worldnet of the book is not completely thought out. This is a comment which I heard, and agree. Worldnet was a bit scant, and you're left hungry for more information on how and why worldnet developed, functions, etc. Here again I feel the authors choose to gloss this part of the story for they were more interested in pursuing the concepts of intelligence, human nature, and sentient beings, and the interactions between humans, and another sentient intelligence, rather than forecasting where networks are in detail or where networking is going.

An interesting point of Valentina is that she is a program only, and not a particular machine. In fact the idea is freely explored that programs will become migratory over networks, and different installations, instead of being run on a particular machine. This already is in the works today, and is a fascinating aspect of networking in and of itself. The old questions posed by stories (movies) like COLOSUS, THE FORBIN PROJECT, which were just FRANKENSTEIN stories clothed in transistors, may become laughable as hardware is seen only as a vehicle for the execution of sophisticated intelligent and self learning modules which can converse and reason with people.

There is a flaw of realism in the book on the optimistic portrayal of US, USSR relations in just a decade from now. Seems like 1994 and a world wide network is just not going to happen. Not at the rate we are going politically, even though technically it's not far fetched.

Surprise was raised by some at Celeste's attitude. As the author of Valentina one might expect her to turn it in to MIT for the laurels she'd get and lo and behold, of course the people there would be enlightened

enough to give Valentina it's own machine to run on. But on closer examination, this is not such a reasonable expectation. I can more easily accept an evolving program spontaneously becoming self-aware, than I can believe that any University will graciously give resources and funding and recognition to a radical, revolutionary idea. Witness the research being done into computer viruses. I believe it was USC that required research into this area to stop because it considered the concept of migrating code too dangerous.... so they bury their academic heads in the sand, rather than confront the issue. They would kill Valentina faster than any malicious hacker ever would. In fact this is one of the books points. The hackers which threaten Valentina do so only out of the fault of not relating to her as a sentient creature but as so much bothersome code of another hacker, just purge the damn thing.... But after they are convinced of her sentience, they in fact become her greatest allies! This is a remarkable statement, and one of the most hopeful points of the books.

I thought Valentina was a fine work, and even one that has some important questions to raise, outside of its fine entertainment value, as an SF story. I've been told that there are other stories which successfully exploit this motif as well. Anyone else out there know of similar stories with new twists and insights on such issues???

"The meat is rotten, but the booze is holding out."  
Computer Translation of "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak"

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